



Why Do We Need Wobble Rooms during COVID-19?

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Abstract

The “wobble room” is a wellness intervention designed to guide staff through unpredictable times that are not going away quickly. Emergency department teams are accustomed to trauma events and trauma debriefing, but the prolonged uncertainties and fears associated with COVID-19 have posed a unique challenge for healthcare workers. The wobble room has become a place where staff can make sense of how the pandemic is affecting them and create a “new normal” with respect to personal safety and team cohesion.

Introduction

Emergency departments (EDs) are at the front lines for the treatment and diagnosis of a wide variety of illnesses and injuries. Within EDs, emergency nurses are continually adapting and changing their work to meet and address daily challenges. When the World Health Organization declared COVID-19 a public health emergency, fears and uncertainty arose among emergency nurses. Uncertainty has been identified as a hallmark of pandemics and can be especially challenging for those working in healthcare (IHI 2020b). A recent publication about emergency nurses reports increased levels of stress and anxiety because of unknowns about the virus, potential depletion of personal protective equipment (PPE) and the risk of illness and potential transmission of sickness to family members (Lai et al. 2020).

Chronic exposure to workplace stressors and a lack of emotional resources and supports have the potential to negatively impact a nurse's health and wellness,

potentially leading to burnout (Maslach and Leiter 2016). Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, ED leadership has played a pivotal role in helping emergency nurses overcome their fears and address stressors in constructive and positive ways (Dirani et al. 2020). This paper describes a wellness intervention, the “wobble room,” which we implemented quickly to proactively support and protect direct care nurses from the adverse mental health effects of COVID-19. One nurse described the wobble room intervention as

a great room to just take a moment to breath[e] and not stress or worry about work or anyone else and just focus on myself.

Background

EDs are highly stressful work environments where nurses are continually faced with heavy workloads, overcrowding and resource shortages (Xu et al. 2019). Consequences of regular exposure to work-related stressors can lead to increased absenteeism, poor job performance and staff morale, burnout and medical errors (Adriaenssens et al. 2011; Xu et al. 2019). As COVID-19 began spreading throughout the world, the news media in other parts of the world reported hospitals to be at maximum capacity, with overwhelmed emergency services and severe nurse shortages (Jun et al. 2020). Previous experience with severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) raised concerns about the novel coronavirus and its potential negative impact on nurses' health and well-being. In one study on SARS and Canadian nurses, there were increases in sick absences and maladaptive coping (Maunder et al. 2006). The Institute for Healthcare Improvement (IHI) uses the term “psychological PPE” to describe how leadership can create conditions to support the mental health of staff during the COVID-19 pandemic (IHI 2020a). The IHI publication on psychological PPE provides considerable evidence on how early, simple interventions can ease adverse mental health effects from the unknowns of a pandemic.

The first three authors of this paper are in a nursing leadership team within the Vancouver General Hospital (VGH). VGH is a tertiary care teaching and referral hospital serving a wide variety of adult patient populations with specialized services. Our ED sees between 250 and 320 patients per day, and this department employs over 200 direct care nurses. As members of the leadership team, we began participating in frequent daily operation briefings and staff informational meetings as the COVID-19 pandemic became a reality in Canada. Provincially, healthcare organizations, including VGH, used emergency operations centre (EOC) guidelines to efficiently manage communications and policy directives along the chain of formal authority. Since the March 2020 pandemic announcement, our EOC structures and processes have been providing direction on planning, operations, logistics and finance, playing a vital role in controlling the level

of uncertainty and fear surrounding the management of COVID-19. Over time, however, our leadership team recognized that the EOC “must do” directives did not counsel providers on how to care for their own mental health and well-being amid the urgent, rapid changes to protect the public and staff from COVID-19. Despite up-to-date communications throughout the organization, direct care nurses began to verbalize their concerns about personal and patient safety. We conducted an impromptu survey to determine nurses’ primary concerns. Major issues from our survey were voiced as follows:

Unknowns. We don’t know when things will get worse.

Will we have enough staff and PPEs?

Will we have space for critically ill patients?

Another common concern was whether or not to self-isolate from family and friends:

I can’t see people outside my immediate bubble.

Given the rising concerns regarding high levels of stress among our nursing staff, we decided to initiate our own psychological PPE, the wobble room.

We first learned about this health and wellness strategy through a social media tweet on March 27, 2020, by Dr. Rachel Pilling (2020), a pediatric ophthalmologist working at the Bradford Teaching Hospital, which is a part of the National Health Service (NHS) in West Yorkshire, England. The wobble room idea was something we could implement right away. We are uncertain where the initial idea for the wobble room originated; our knowledge about this concept stems from social media tweets. A *Nursing Times* article (Ford 2020) describes how the wobble room concept has taken hold throughout the NHS trusts, appearing in hospital clinics and departments in either physical or virtual forms. The common denominator for wobble rooms is a place where staff can unburden themselves and support each other. The *Nursing Times* article also includes feedback from staff, with praise for a dedicated space, virtual or physical, where the staff can focus on their own and others’ mental well-being. Because our ED had limited space, we were motivated to implement our own version of the wobble room.

The Wobble Room

The wobble room at VGH occupies a small conference room that we transformed into a dedicated “time-out” space, open to any ED team member at any time of the day. The space can accommodate up to six people while allowing for safe

physical distancing. The wobble room provides an environment where staff can be alone for quiet time, or connect with each other to de-stress. Twice-weekly group drop-in sessions with an employee wellness counsellor provide a more structured discussion environment for staff, and these group sessions are available via Zoom for those at home during the meetings. Our wobble room also hosts an “encouragement wall” with peer and patient expressions of appreciation and positivity. Additional homey touches include an essential oil diffuser and decorations, such as a light-box sign and colourful motivational posters, in order to provide calm and help mitigate the often chaotic clinical environment of the ED. Lastly, staff can access information on wellness resources, including contacts for individual counselling sessions, available through our organization’s employee assistance program.

Although the wobble room started as a nursing intervention, queries from other healthcare providers quickly resulted in the inclusion of all ED staff – physicians, administrative staff, housekeeping staff, social workers and others. We truly are “all in this together,” a departmental motto that we organically adopted through conversations with each other. The wobble room has been available since April 2020. With the help of staff, we were able to get it in place within a month. Anecdotal feedback from users indicates that our wobble room is an opportunity to improve individual coping and promote team cohesion. We conducted a wobble room survey in 2020 through which one ED provider shared the following with us:

The wobble room was a place for me to debrief when my grandfather died and I couldn’t go home because of COVID, and a place to connect with co-workers in a way I hadn’t before.

Another staff member shared their appreciation for access to a trained counsellor in the wobble room:

[Name] was a great sounding board and had suggestions for ways I could decompress.

We are planning another survey with staff for a mental health check-in and to canvass staff for other psychological PPE ideas.

Discussion

According to leadership experts (Hannah et al. 2009), during extreme events, such as natural disasters and pandemics, leaders must make evidence-informed directives and they must also address the social factors associated with team identity and cohesion – the glue that gets us through pandemics. Unambiguous and clear goals and strategies help foster a climate of preparedness, but they are not enough;

local leadership guidance is also needed to address ongoing fears and concerns. Leadership guidance helps people reflect and make sense of what matters to them. Trauma event literature describes this as “psychic reorganization” to create a sense of personal and team safety (Hannah et al. 2009: 905).

As a leadership team in the midst of a pandemic, we believe that psychological PPE for ED staff, such as the wobble room, is as critical to our staff as the EOC guidelines. During pandemics, it is important for leaders to create work environments that reduce the potential for burnout, anxiety and depression among their staff (Enns and Sawatzky 2016). The wobble room is a place of wellness for all: a protective space for staff mental health and well-being and a means to enhance team cohesion and raise awareness of the importance of others in our personal and professional lives. Nurses or other staff members, from acute care to community-based care, can initiate their own version of a wobble room as a protective factor against the stressors of the workplace. As ED nurse leaders, the wobble room is our way of supporting staff during unpredictable times that are not going away quickly. ED teams are accustomed to trauma events and trauma debriefing, but the prolonged uncertainties and fears associated with COVID-19 have posed a unique challenge for all of us. The wobble room has become a place where we can make sense of how the pandemic is affecting us and create a “new normal” with respect to our personal safety and team cohesion.

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